



short period, the lifespan of one man, saw the confluence of three immensely influential historical developments: the Renaissance, the Reformation and the emergence of England as a maritime power.

#### “THE NEW WORLD OF ENGLISH WORDS”

The Renaissance had different effects in every European country. In England, there had occurred, in the years since Caxton set up his printing press at Westminster, a communications revolution, probably not matched until the present age of word processors and videos. The printing press transformed society. Before 1500 the total number of books printed throughout Europe was about 35,000, most of them in Latin. Between 1500 and 1640, in England alone, some 20,000 items in English were printed, ranging from pamphlets and broadsheets to folios and Bibles. The result was to accelerate the education of the rising middle class. Some estimates suggest that by 1600 nearly half the population had some kind of minimal literacy, at least in the cities and towns. The economics of the book trade also encouraged the spread of the vernacular. Outside the universities, people preferred to read books in English rather than in Latin or Greek, and printers naturally tried to satisfy their customers' demand.

Gradually, the sheer popularity of English began to tell. In 1531 Sir Thomas Elyot, statesman and scholar, published *The Book Named the Governour*, perhaps the first book on education printed in English. He had plenty of new words to play with – *education* and *dedicate*, for example. Elyot himself was uneasy about some of his usages. He apologized for introducing the word *maturity*, which he admitted was “strange and dark” (obscure), but which, as he put it, would soon be “facile to understande as other wordes late comen out of Italy and Fraunce”. Besides, such borrowings from Latin were part of “the necessary augmentation of our language”.

English could not escape the influence of the classics. The revival of learning and the study of classical models produced a new breed of scholar-writers from Thomas More to Francis Bacon, who, turning their backs on the dog-Latin of the Middle Ages, devoted themselves to the cultivation of style, often disdaining what they saw as the awkwardness of the mother tongue. When Tudor men of letters wrote in English, they embellished their prose with Latinate words. Latin, after all, was still the universal medium of the written word, and Bacon, like many of his contemporaries, actually preferred to write in Latin, which he considered the proper medium of scholarship. The ransacked classical past provided new words like *agile*, *capsule* and *habitual* (from Latin), and *catastrophe*, *lexicon* and *thermometer* (from Greek).

Many of these borrowings did not simply have a literary origin. The Renaissance was also a scientific revolution and English had to accommodate these changes. New discoveries and new inventions needed new descriptions, creating words like *atmosphere*, *pneumonia* and *skeleton*. Galileo was redefining the natural world: an *encyclopaedia* would now be needed to explain the idea of *gravity*. Vesalius had transformed man's understanding of the human

anatomy: *excrement*, *strenuous* and *excrescence* are all new words from these years. In physics, the work of scientists like William Gilbert was introducing words such as *paradox*, *external* and *chronology*. (Recourse to Latin and Greek for such purposes continues in the late twentieth century, for example in *video*, *television*, and *synthesizer*.)

By no means all of these new words were Latin or Greek in origin. There were French borrowings like *bigot* and *detail*; Italian architectural borrowings like *cupola*, *portico* and *stucco*; bellicose Spanish words (reflecting contemporary conflicts) like *desperado* and *embargo*; nautical words from the Low Countries like *smuggle* (*smuggeler*) and *reef* (*rif*). In these times sailors were the messengers of language. Part of their vocabulary would have been "Low Dutch" words like *fokkinge*, *kunte*, *krappe* (probably derived from Latin) and *bugger* (originally a Dutch borrowing from the French), words that are sometimes inaccurately said to be "Anglo-Saxon". From the poetry of Spenser (who invented *braggadocio* in *The Faerie Queen*) to the slang of the sailors who defeated the Armada, there was, throughout English society, a new urge to use English to communicate.

The importance of the Renaissance to the English language was that it added between 10,000 and 12,000 new words to the lexicon. In 1658, looking back on the myriad coinings of the previous century, Milton's nephew, Edward Philips, summarized the experience in the title of his glossary, "The New World of English Words".

#### "ENGLISHE MATTER IN THE ENGLISCHE TONGUE"

In contrast to the internationalism of the worlds of scholarship and commerce, Tudor politics – the Reformation, and the growth of national feeling – emphasized the splendid isolation of Shakespeare's "scepter'd isle". Throughout the Tudor century, England fought with her continental neighbours. Henry VIII broke with Rome. Elizabeth I was threatened by the superpowers of the age, France and Spain. The spirit of the Armada – a small island beating off a huge invasion fleet – was matched by an independent-minded queen. "I thank God", she told her Parliament, "I am endowed with such qualities that if I were turned out of the realm in my petticoat, I were able to live in any place in Christendom."

The fortunes of the English language during these years echoed the battles between England and Europe. Many were as proud of their mother tongue in all its vernacular plainness as they were of defying the pope or defeating the Spanish. There were some who wanted to stem the flood of foreign borrowings. Thomas Chaloner, for instance, is often quoted for his attack on writers who "serche . . . out of some rotten Pamphlet foure or fyve disused woords of antiquitee, therewith to darken the sence unto the reader". Critics had a phrase for these new "woords of antiquitee", calling them *inkhorn terms* – and much ink was spilt arguing their merits for the language.

The battle between "inkhorn terms" and "plainnesse", raging throughout the middle years of the century, even became a popular issue in the playhouses. Ben Jonson has a scene in which the poet Marston is purged of Latinate borrowings like *retrograde*, *reciprocal*, *defunct* and *inflate*, words that are now everyday currency. His rival, Shakespeare, summarized the



Logan, the state secretary of Pennsylvania, himself from Ulster, enthusiastically granted a chunk of land to a group of Scots-Irish to establish the new American frontier town of Donegal.

At the time we were apprehensive from the Northern Indians ... I therefore thought it prudent to plant a settlement of such men as those who formerly had so bravely defended Londonderry and Enniskillen as a frontier against any disturbance.

Logan soon doubted his own judgement. The Scots-Irish were nothing but trouble. "A settlement of five families from the North of Ireland gives me more trouble than fifty of any other people." He was infuriated by their "audacious and disorderly habit" of claiming squatters' rights on "any spot of vacant land they fancied".

At odds with the English, they moved inland – through German country. The Pennsylvania Dutch, who had first come here in the 1680s, traded words and customs with their Scottish and English neighbours. The language picked up words like *hex* meaning "a spell", and food words like *sauerkraut*. The Scots settled briefly, for a generation – the cemeteries of Pennsylvania recall typical Scots family names like Agnew, Hamilton and Taggart. Many Scots-Irish now became absorbed into the life of the new society, mixing with their English and German neighbours. As their children grew up young Americans, the distinctive accents of all three ethnic groups became merged into one variety of American speech. With their love of music and song, the Scots-Irish borrowed the dulcimer from their German neighbours and, for defence against a harsh climate, German-style log-cabins.

The Scots-Irish who did not settle pushed on south through the Cumberland Gap towards the hills of Appalachia. On the frontier, they bore the brunt of Indian hostility. They tended to live isolated lives in backwoods settlements. It was a harsh, pioneering existence, but they had become well suited to it. They were fierce, clannish and unruly. It is said that they were overfond of whisky. With their long rifles and coonskin hats, Scots-Irish frontiersmen, like the legendary Davy Crockett, acquired a ferocious reputation as Indian fighters. Great boasters and compulsive storytellers, they had a keen ear for a striking phrase. Davy Crockett described himself as, "Fresh from the backwoods, half-horse, half-alligator, a little touched with snapping turtle, can wade the Mississippi, leap the Ohio, ride a streak of lightning, slide down a honey locust and not get scratched." Their descendants are found in the remoter parts of the Appalachian mountains.

The Scots-Irish brought with them a rich oral culture: aphorisms, proverbs, superstitions and an ability to turn a striking phrase – *mad as a meat axe, dead as a hammer, so drunk he couldn't hit the wall with a handful of beans*. It was the frontiersmen who first spoke of someone with *an axe to grind*, or someone who *sat on the fence* when he should perhaps *go the whole hog*. Their rhymes and ditties came from the traditions of Scotland and Ireland. Their ballads, such as *Edward*, tell the stories of their ancestors, and the tunes of the Scottish Lowland ballads of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been an important influence in the making of American country music.

# LIFE IN PHILADELPHIA.

Plate 12.

Dal is very fine, Mc  
Mortimer, -you sing  
quite con a moor, as  
de Italians say!!

" Take away, take away dose rosy lips,  
" Rich, rich in balmy treasure!  
" Turn away, turn away dose eyes ob  
" Less I die wid pleasure !!!



88 This crude caricature, published in Philadelphia in the 1830s, demonstrates some of the long-standing stereotypes of Black American English.

## 6

BLACK  
ON WHITE

Philadelphia is a city with one of the oldest free Black communities in the United States. In the 1830s, more than two hundred years after the first slaves were shipped to America, an anonymous Philadelphian cartoonist published a series of crude satires aimed at the pretensions of the local Black middle class. In a way that now seems profoundly racist, the artist caricatured Black imitations of White society – the musical evening, the tea party, and so on. He also represented what he took to be Black speech. “Shall I hab de honor to dance de next quadrille wid you, Miss Minta?” asks a bewigged partygoer. Yet for all their prejudice, these cartoons provide solid evidence of a long-standing, distinctive and separate Black English tradition (recognized, though misunderstood, by the Whites), with its own rules of grammar and pronunciation, its own roots and heritage.

In the past, such use of English was often thought to be lazy, or ungrammatical, or even to suggest an inferior intelligence. Now it is gradually being recognized as just another variety of English, neither worse nor better than the way English is spoken by Scots or New Yorkers or Londoners or Sydneysiders, with as much right to exist as any other variety of English. Yet it remains controversial even within the Black community. For some, it is an authentic means of self-expression for Black English speakers throughout America and the world. For others, who prefer the norms of Standard English, Black English represents the disadvantaged past, an obstacle to advancement, something better unlearned, denied or forgotten.

The cruel process that brought Africa into collision with European culture has enriched the English language with everyday words like *voodoo*, *tote*, *banjo*, *juke*, and *banana*. We also owe familiar phrases like *to bad-mouth*, *a high five* and *jam session*, and expressions like *yum-yum* and *nitty gritty* to the African speech traditions. Ironically, even *Sambo*, hated by the Black community as a racial stereotype, has three West African derivations. And beyond the obvious influence of words and phrases, the culture of Black English – from Negro spirituals to rock’n’ roll – is permeated by its African past.

The story of the Blacks in history is surrounded by controversy and polemic. The story of their language – the nerve-end of politics – is no exception. No other form of speech in the history of the English language has been so deplored, debated and defended. Its stigma is ironic: Black English itself was the product of one of the most infamous episodes in the



had seen the West, and declared it to be a fraud. A generation later, Oscar Wilde lectured his way round America and ended up drinking gold miners under the saloon tables of the Wild West. As the frontier expanded, its language changed with each new environment.

In the first part of the nineteenth century the vast American continent offered so many obstacles to travel that the easiest way to the West was along the great broad Mississippi, running up from New Orleans to St Louis, then the heart of the country. The Mississippi is 2340 miles long and has 250 tributaries, including the Ohio and Missouri rivers. It takes its name from the Chippewa Indian *mici sibi* (big river), but it is more than that. The river was a way of life. It ferried settlers, farmers and merchants; it prompted the development of the *steamboat*, or *paddlesteamer*. Together with its mighty tributaries, it was the cargo route for cotton, sugar, tobacco and slaves; it brought prosperity to scores of cities and towns, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, Kansas City, Minneapolis, St Louis, Memphis, Baton Rouge and, of course, New Orleans. Mark Twain, the river's greatest admirer, its pilot, poet and immortalizer, wrote:

When I was a boy, there was but one permanent ambition among my comrades in our village [Hannibal, Missouri] on the west bank of the Mississippi River. That was, to be a steamboatman. We had transient ambitions of other sorts, but they were only transient. When a circus came and went, it left us all burning to become clowns; the first Negro minstrel show that ever came to our section left us all suffering to try that kind of life; now and then we had a hope that, if we lived and were good, God would permit us to be pirates. These ambitions faded out, each in its turn; but the ambition to be a steamboatman always remained.

Small or large, the river steamboats, floating palaces of the Mississippi, carried the notorious *river gamblers*, from professional poker players exploiting the traveling fat-cats from the plantations, to the freebooting conmen who preyed on the poorer deck passengers, or *standees* as they were known. Gambling was ubiquitous. In *The Domestic Manners of the Americans*, Mrs Frances Trollope, the mother of the novelist Anthony Trollope, reported that, "No boat left New Orleans without having as cabin passengers one or two gentlemen whose profession it was to drill the fifty-two elements of a deck of cards to profitable duty."

The gambling game *par excellence* was poker. The word itself comes from a three-card game (known to the French as *poque*) which swept through America's frontier society like a religion. Betting became so much a part of the American way of life in the more remote parts of the Union that the phrase "You bet" soon became the standard affirmative. Mark Twain tells the story of a Westerner who has been instructed to bring a newly widowed wife the news of her husband's death. "Does Joe Toole live here?" he asks. She nods. "Bet you he don't!" replies the man.

The French origins of poker – present in usages like *ace* and *deuce* – were soon forgotten, especially when the Westerners evolved their own variant, *stud* poker (one card down, the other cards up). As the wild men of the West carried the game far and wide, so phrases like *put*

*up or shut up, I'll call your bluff* and *passing the buck* entered the language. (The buck was the buckhorn-handled knife placed in front of the dealer and passed by a player who did not care to deal the next hand.) *Deal* itself, a word with a long pedigree, now acquired a whole new resonance, spawning a family of phrases, from *square deal* to *new deal*, to *fair deal* to *raw deal* and *big deal*! Once the cards had been dealt, the quality of *bluffing* became an important factor in the game. By the middle of the century, *bluff* was synonymous with poker, and the best way to win was to have a *poker face* and to hope that *the cards weren't stacked against you*. Such gambling terms are now common in English. We talk about having *an ace up one's sleeve*, and we boast that we will *up the ante*, we say of someone that he has *hit the jackpot*, or *loaded the dice*, or *thrown in his hand*, or *played both ends against the middle*, that he *wouldn't follow suit* and preferred to *play a wild card* when perhaps he should have recognized that *the chips were down*.

The frontier drink was whiskey, (or *joywater*, or *firewater* or *corn juice*) and was made not, as in Britain, from barley, but from corn (maize or Indian corn) or rye. Whiskey, neat or mixed, was the staple of frontier life. The legendary Davy Crockett once proposed that "Congress allows lemonade to the members and has it charged under the head of stationery – I move also that *whiskey* be allowed under the item of fuel." From the first, American *bartenders* liked to experiment and innovate. *Cocktail* makes its first appearance in 1806 and, from then to now, the cocktail has been as American as a dry martini – in Mencken's memorable phrase, "The only American invention as perfect as a sonnet." The early history of the word "cocktail" is shrouded, as so often, in mystery, but some believe that, like some other Americanisms it may have an African pedigree. In the Krio of Sierra Leone, *kaktel* means "scorpion" – a creature with a sting in the tail.

At the frontier itself, whiskey was traded unmixed and often used to corrupt the local Indians. Congress tried to regulate the worst excesses of the liquor trade, but the pioneers turned to *bootlegging* (the whiskey would be sold illegally to the Indians in a flat bottle that



115 "A riverboat", Mark Twain once wrote, "is like a wedding cake – without the complications."



116 American English owes many striking phrases to the Mississippi riverboat gambling man.



*The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me:  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.*

Bad poetry, but good propaganda. As O. Henry, the American storywriter, once remarked of the Statue of Liberty, "It was made by a Dago ... on behalf of the French ... for the purpose of welcomin' Irish immigrants to the Dutch city of New York." The city remains an ethnic mosaic, especially in its foods: *liverwurst* from Germany, *goulash* from Hungary, *borscht* from Russia, *lasagne* from Italy, *Guinness* from Ireland, *lox* and *bagels* from Central Europe.

The impact of these huge invasions was less than might have been expected because most immigrants were anxious to enlist in American society as rapidly as possible. From the Gaelic-speaking Irish to the Yiddish-speaking Jews, they adopted English with enthusiasm, at least in public. (There were some discreet nudges in this direction from some American institutions: it was impossible, for example, to borrow foreign-language books from the New York Public Library.) At home, the older generation tended to cling to their mother tongue, and even today many American families are virtually bilingual. The experience of the immigrant children was quite different. Once again, as with the children of the Southern plantations, we find that in the schoolroom, and especially the playground, there were fierce pressures favoring the use of the American standard. The schools were the places where the immigrant children were rapidly Americanized by their playmates, and life was made intolerable, one imagines, for the child who had to use a foreign word rather than the English.

Among the most distinctive and serious-minded of the new arrivals were the American Germans. Since 1776 a total of some seven million Germans have come to the United States – some middle class (after 1848), some working class (after the Civil War). They lived in German cities like Cincinnati, Ohio, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and St Louis, Missouri. Like earlier English immigrants, they remembered the Old World in the New: in the United States there are twelve Berlins; seven Germantowns; four Bismarcks; and five Fredericks. The Germans established themselves quickly: by 1860 there were twenty-eight daily German newspapers in fifteen cities. It is probably for this reason – a large, professionally successful, literate alternative culture – that American English acquired German words like *bummer* (*Bummler*, loafer), *check* (*Zeiche*, bill for drinks), *cookbook* (*Kochbuch*), *delicatessen* (*Delikatesse*, delicacies), *ecology* (*Ökologie*), *fresh* (*frech*, impertinent), *hoodlum* (German Bavarian word: *Hoadlum*, rowdy), *kindergarten*, *nix* (*nichts*, nothing), *phooey* (*pfui*), *rifle* (*riffel*, groove), *scram!* (Yiddish: *scrammen*), *spiel* (*spielen*, play), *yesman* (*Jasager*, yes-sayer). A further reflection of the distinctive German contribution to American society is the direct translation of German into English: *and how!* (*und wie*), *no way* (*keineswegs*), *can be* (*kann sein*), *will do* (*wird getan*) and even *let it be* (*lass es sein*).

Before the First World War, the Germans were a popular element in American society, renowned in the universities for their science, their philosophy and their pedantry. After the *Lusitania* was sunk in 1915 with the loss of 1200 lives, they became *Huns*, the *Boche* (from the French *al boche*: *al*-lemand *ca-boche* i.e. German blockhead), and finally, in the movies,



*Jerries*. This was borrowed from British troops in the trenches – the English slang word for a chamber-pot, “Jerry”, was applied to the Germans because their coal-scuttle helmets looked like chamber-pots. The rash of anti-German feeling was reflected in a changing of names. Many Knoebels became Noble; many Shoens, Shane; and many Steins, Stone. *Sauerkraut* became “liberty cabbage”, and *frankfurters* became “hot dogs”. If you are an American and your name is Astor, Budweiser, Chrysler, Custer, Eisenhower, Frick, Heinz, Pershing, Rockefeller, Singer, Steinway, Studebaker or Westinghouse, then you are a member of the biggest and most longstanding non-British ethnic group in the United States.

The Italians, who followed the Germans, were of a different social class and status, as the abusive nickname *wop* suggests. There is an apocryphal story that the immigration authorities on Ellis Island would tag the new immigrants who arrived without proper papers with a label initialed WOP (without passport). The evidence that *wop* comes from *guappo*, a Neapolitan dialect word for a dandy, often used by Italians to refer to the Neapolitans, is rather more conclusive. Either way, the point is made: the Italians tended to be poor, often illiterate, peasants from the South. Between 1865 and 1920, as the age of the steamship brought cheap travel to more and more Europeans, more than five million Italians came to the United States, mainly to the great cities of the North-East. Soon – as in New York – every city had its *Little Italy*. Unlike the Germans, the less-educated Italians made a more complete adoption of American English. As a result, the influence of Italian words is mainly limited to food words like *pizza*, *spaghetti*, *lasagne*, *espresso*, *cannelloni*, *minestrone*, *parmesan*, *pasta*, *vermicelli*, *tortellini*, *macaroni*, *ravioli*, *broccoli*, and *zucchini*.



124 Generations of Europeans passed through Ellis Island and, after a medical examination, acquired a new American identity.